**THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB,** first published in 1815

By: Lord Byron

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,   
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;   
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,   
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,   
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:   
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,   
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,   
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;   
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,   
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,   
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;   
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,   
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,   
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:   
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,   
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,   
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;   
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,   
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Kayla Paden

AP Literature

Explication

9 December 2009

Massacre: the Work of the Lord

In the Christian faith, the methods and the reasons for some actions in the Bible are hard to understand from a modern-day perspective. Many try to explain God’s ways through an analysis of God’s other decisions and miracles. However, some find music, art, and poetry are better mediums for one to question God’s actions. For Lord Byron, poetry is his medium of choice. Lord Byron’s poem, "The Destruction of Sennacherib,” uses allusions, rhyming, and figurative language to convey the theme of the Christian God’s universal power against all evil.

The device first is an allusion to the story of Sennacherib and his attack on the city of Jerusalem. Sennacherib and his army from Assyria marched into Judea and sent a commander into the city to tell the citizens to surrender and denounce God (John). When Hezekiah, the king, heard the news, he began praying to God. God told the king not to fear and sent angels to slay the 185,000 men army of Sennacherib (“Sennacherib”). Sennacherib returned alone to Assyria, where his two sons killed him. The words “Assyrian” and “spears” in the first stanza help portray the allusion of Sennacherib by creating an image and a negative opinion of the main character (1,3). The first stanza tells of how the army approached the city and the manner of the army’s travel. Later in the third stanza, the “Angel of Death” comes and silences the hearts of the “foe” that once “heaved” (9-10, 12). The Angel of Death refers to Gabriel, the archangel the God sent to destroy the army (“Sennacherib”). As the angel passes through the camp of sleeping enemies, the soldiers become chilled and die. Later in the fifth stanza, the even the leader of the enemy army lays in cold in the silent. The rider refers to Sennacherib who is also the Assyrian in the first stanza. Sennacherib is the last one to be killed. In the silence of his soldier’s death, Sennacherib is punished for his defiance against God. In the final stanza, the “idols” are broken in “Baal” and the “Gentile” is destroyed by the “Lord” (21, 24). The idols in Baal refer to the religion of the Assyrian people. The idols were broken because it portrays the idea that God is all-powerful. The destruction also shows the true God to the Assyrians, since they had worshiped many false idols and gods. Finally, the Gentile that is melted by God refers to Sennacherib, whose earthly power and wealth was no match for God’s supremacy. The conclusion of the allusion points to the theme of the poem: no evil force can defeat the work of God. The allusion also has a theme itself which when one puts faith in God, God will provide with protection.

The rhyming at the ends of the lines helps to strengthen the flow and importance of the allusion. End rhyming is implemented between two lines at a time. Each stanza has two sets of end rhyming similar to two couplets per stanza. For example, in the first stanza lines one and two are a pair of end rhymes along with lines three and four. Mostly, the rhyming is perfect masculine rhyming such as “blown” and “strown” in lines seven and eight. However, some rhyming pairs rely on homophones for perfect rhyming. In lines twenty and twenty-one “pale” is rhymed with “mail” instead of the homophone “male.” The rhyme relies on the spellings of other homophone to provide perfect rhyme without having to depend on one connotation. The word “male” could have been used in line twenty-one, but for the context of the poem, the homophone “mail” fit better. The rhyming remains the same, yet the meaning and spelling of the sound changes. The assonance is used primarily to provide a sense of legitimacy to the story of the poem. The rhyming lets the story flow and softens the death and destruction of the story without losing the overall theme of an invincible God in the poem. Without the end rhyming the emphases of the lines would fall on the scenes of death and not the ends of the lines.

In addition to end rhyming, the poem implies figurative language to further describe the details of the allusion. In line one the “Assyrian” is being compared to a “wolf” through the use of a simile. The word wolf implies a cunning, vicious and antichristian animal that conquers the innocent and meek. The second stanza uses the similes about the seasons to show the change in the power of the army. In lines five through six, the army is compared to summer. At the beginning of the year the temperatures are cold and gradually get warmer until summer when the temperature peak. Similar to the force of the army as time goes by the army conquers more land and becomes stronger. Eventually, the strength of Sennacherib peaks and begins to decrease like the temperature in the autumn. The final simile occurs in the last two lines of the poem. This simile compares the “Gentile” to “snow.” A gentile is one who does not believe in God which, in this case, refers to Sennacherib. Sennacherib, who at one time was very powerful on Earth, is destroyed just as easily as snow in the sun. The poem only implicates similes when describing Sennacherib. This occurrence may be due to the idea that similes are the weakest forms of figurative language parallel to Sennacherib being weaker than God. Utilizing the similes from previous stanzas, the last simile also contributes to the seasons. During the winter snow accumulates like the bodies after the angels’ massacre. However, in the spring the bodies disappear like the snow without leaving an impact or a mark on the world. Similar to the way the seasons dispose of snow, God eliminates the evil on his Earth to cleanse the world from evil.

Karma is the idea that the morals behind a decision can affect the fate of ones on life. In the “Destruction of Sennacherib,” one’s decisions coming back to haunt one’s life is illustrated through the allusion of Sennacherib. The utilization of rhyming and figurative language emphasizes certain aspects of the poem and creates imagery for the allusion. The poem portrays the story and highlights the idea of God using Karma to punish others for their evils.

Works Cited

Byron, Lord. “The Destruction of Sennacherib.” Perrine’s Literature Structure, Sound and Sense. Ed.

Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson. Boston: Thomson Higher Education, 2006. 141-159.

John A. Brinkman "Sennacherib"  *The Oxford Guide to People and Places of the Bible*. Ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, 2001. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press.  Erie County Public Library (IP).  9 December 2009   <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t97.e295>

“Sennacherib.” Wikapedia. 2009. 9 Dec. 2009. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sennacherib>>.

